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Has the UN Human Rights Council become Frankenstein?

If Eleanor Roosevelt and René Cassin were alive today, and beheld a body that legitimizes murderers, dictators and anti-Semites, would they not be revolted by what has become of their creation?

By HILLEL NEUER
 May 19, 2016 22:13

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THE OPENING of the 24th session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva.. (photo credit: (ERIC BRIDIERS/US MISSION GENEVA))

Seventy years ago this week, in the aftermath of the Nazi atrocities, Eleanor Roosevelt and French legal philosopher René Cassin assembled for the first meeting of the UN Commission on Human Rights. The founders had a dream: to reaffirm the principle of human dignity, and to guarantee fundamental freedoms for all.

Over time, in contrast to the commission's breathtaking surroundings on the shores of Lake Geneva, things turned ugly. Dictatorships hijacked the world body. In 2003, they elected the murderous regime of Libya's Muammar Gaddafi as chair.

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This final straw prompted UN secretary-general Kofi Annan to call for scrapping the commission, which he said was plagued with "politicization", "selectivity" and a "credibility deficit" – all of which "cast a shadow on the reputation of the United Nations system as a whole."

At Annan's initiative, the UN in June 2006 replaced it with the Human Rights Council, promising a reformed body of members committed to human rights, which would address the world's most severe abuses.

Ahead of the council's celebration next month of its 10th anniversary, we ask: Is the new body living up to the promises of reform? Consider its record in responding to gross violations. Over 50 sessions, only 14 of 193 countries have been condemned – less than what even the discredited commission accomplished.

The majority of abusers enjoy impunity. In China, 1.3 billion people are denied freedoms of speech, assembly and religion.

Tibetans are tortured. The council's response? Silence.

On the contrary, in violation of the criteria guaranteed in the council's 2006 charter, China was elected as a member.

In Russia, dissidents are harassed, arrested, even assassinated.

Vladimir Putin's regime wages bloody wars, invading Ukraine and swallowing Crimea. The council's response? Silence. On the contrary: Russia, too, was elected a member.

In Saudi Arabia, women are subjugated, and beheadings are at an all-time high. The council's response? Silence. A recent attempt to investigate Saudi Arabia's carpet bombing of Yemeni civilians was quashed. On the contrary: Saudi Arabia, too, was elected a member.

And faced with reports of torture in Algeria, forced child labor in Congo, attacks on dissidents in Cuba, abuse of foreign workers in Qatar, incommunicado detentions in the United Arab Emirates, the imprisonment of Caracas Mayor Antonio Ledezma and other democracy leaders in Venezuela, and arbitrary arrests in Vietnam, what has the council done, over its 10 years, to protect these victims? Absolutely nothing. On the contrary: The UN elected every single one of these abusers as a council member. With 62 percent non-democracies, the council's 2016 membership is the worst ever.

Defenders cite the council's new Universal Periodic Review mechanism, which purports to examine every country. Yet those doing the examining are their peers. China praises Saudi Arabia for respecting religious freedom, and the next day Saudi Arabia praises China for respecting minority rights.

By contrast, consider where the 47-nation body is active.

The council's pathological obsession with demonizing Israelis, and denying their human rights, has never been worse.

It has adopted 67 resolutions condemning Israel – six more than for the rest of the world combined.

The texts on Israel are uniquely suffused with the suppression of any countervailing facts that might provide balance.

Because if something is to be portrayed as evil, which is the sole purpose of the council's special agenda item targeting Israel, nothing good can ever be said of it.

Its commissions of inquiry like that which produced the Goldstone Report in 2009, excoriating Israel while exonerating Hamas, initiated an era whereby a terrorist group has come to rely on the council as an effective international tool to achieve its deadly goals.

Hamas is given an incentive by the UN to fire attacks at Israeli civilians while placing its own civilian population in harm's way.

And just now, the council instituted – without any legal basis – a UN blacklist of Israeli companies doing business across the Green Line. By implementing the anti-Israel boycott campaign, the world body seeks to strangle the economic life of Israeli citizens.

Finally, consider the experts appointed by the council. A number do important work. But far too many are wolves in sheep's clothing, picked

by dictatorships to do their bidding in the name of human rights.

- In 2008, they appointed Richard Falk, who promotes the 9/11 conspiracy theory and backs Hamas.
- In 2013, they reelected Jean Ziegler, co-founder of the Muammar Gaddafi Human Rights Prize, an award given to Hugo Chavez, Louis Farrakhan and Holocaust denier Roger Garaudy.
- In 2015, the council made Idriss Jazairy a UN human rights expert – even though in his former post as Algeria’s ambassador, he was the one who led the aggressive campaign of non-democracies to muzzle UN rights experts.

Who selects this rogues’ gallery? Last year, the head of the council panel that shortlists candidates was the representative of Saudi Arabia, Faisal bin Hassan Trad.

We are actually about to mark a third anniversary. Next month, Geneva will celebrate 200 years since Mary Shelley and her husband, the great Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, joined Lord Byron and a few others at Villa Diodati, nestled in the beautiful hills of Cologny, just above Lake Geneva.

In that cold and dark June of 1816, amid storms of thunder and lightning, they exchanged ghost stories. Mary Shelley then had a nightmare, which she famously published: the story of an idealistic student who tried to create life, only to be horrified by the result – the story of Frankenstein.

When I walk past Villa Diodati, gazing across Lake Geneva to see the majestic UN building that houses the council, I cannot help but wonder: If Eleanor Roosevelt and René Cassin were alive today, and beheld a body that grotesquely legitimizes murderers, dictators and anti-Semites, would they not be revolted by what has become of their creation? Would they not conclude that today’s UN Human Rights Council has become Frankenstein’s monster, and their dream become a nightmare?

This column is based on testimony to the US Congress this week by Hillel Neuer, executive director of UN Watch in Geneva.

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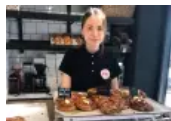
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